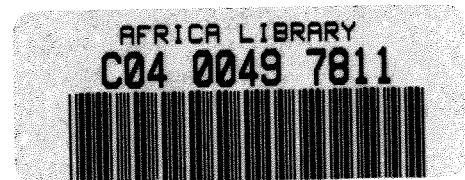




BAP 305.4 FEST



African Women's Voices

Women writing for their rights

Gertrude Fester

GERTRUDE FESTER asserts that inequality continues to privilege white women's writing. The ideas, visions and voices of black women and their girl-children need time, space and exposure. For now this means 'barefoot publishing'.

'But where are the black women writers?' one often hears. All too soon the commission has to be assigned, the same well-known white writer gets the contract and so the cycle continues. But black women are all around—washing dishes, cleaning floors, typing in offices, rearing children and nursing the old and infirm ... doing everything but writing. As in most professions and careers, the position of black women writers starkly reflects the inequalities of the broader society. Black women are on the lowest rung of the ladder of power, privilege and opportunity. The majority of black women are still uneducated and concentrated in jobs like farm labourers, domestic workers and 'unskilled' work. I want to explore why there is this dearth of women writers and how the black women's writing collective in Cape Town, WEAVE, is making their own intervention and asserting their right to write despite the odds of demanding jobs and family and community tasks.

Writing was, until very recently, a man's game. The world was run by men and written about by men who consequently wrote us, our role and our place in the world. But now, women have stormed the literary bastions en masse and seized the right to write themselves, define themselves.... We have broken out of the stereotypical scheme of madonnas, child-women and whores to portray real human beings, rebellious, anxious, concerned advancing together = women that love, fear, and hate. (Isobel Allende on women writers in Latin America, quoted by Baird (1997:9).

Vanessa Baird (1997) has compiled an impressive anthology of writing of women from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. The book celebrates their diverse and dynamic traditions, which differ starkly from the literary conventions of the West. These voices make the invisible visible with a freshness and innovation that definitely appropriates its space on the literary scene. It is this unique anthology, with an introduction by award winning author, Anita Desai, and richly illustrated by striking photographs, that led Baird to agree with Allende, and she adds that the same applies to women in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Yes, the texts are great literary works but these women writers are a minute percentage of the women of their countries. Sarah Penny (1997:109), freelance journalist, book critic and author of *The Whiteness of Bones* asserts that:

[South African] women have been seminal in the development of the country's canon. Today women still strongly shape the fictional landscape.

I cannot endorse these positions wholeheartedly. Yes, more women, black and other previously historically disadvantaged women, are writing today, but under trying circumstances. It is definitely a tiny percentage of black women who are writing.

Women are not a homogenous group. Penny obviously refers to white middle-class women writers, although they are fewer than 50 percent of South African writers. In South Africa and in many parts of the third world, the majority of women do not have the luxury of education, let alone the ability and time to write. Moreover, even though it is difficult and challenging for the average woman to write, it is even more challenging to publish in a mainly male and white-dominated publishing world.

With the exception of Miriam Tlali, very few black women in South Africa have had the time to

write novels.¹ There are quite a few black women poets. Many women have said that it was easier to write poetry and short stories because of time constraints. In the 1970s, there emerged a few worker and struggle poets. A Natal-based trade union, FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions), published the work of Nise Malange and the ANC (African National Congress) Women's Section in exile published the anthology *Malibongwe*.

In this essay I will explore my own writing and that of various women's writing groups of which I have been part, particularly WEAVE (Women's Education & Artistic Voice and Expressions), which was initiated in Cape Town. I will briefly touch on the role of writing and performance in women's grassroots organisations in the 1980s.

There are numerous reasons why very few black South African women write or even think of themselves as being able to write. Apart from our class and race position, our socialisation was patriarchal. Nice girls became good and dutiful wives and mothers. For most of us, middle or working class, growing up in apartheid South Africa meant we dreamt about perhaps becoming teachers or nurses, never writers or TV personalities. Some of us who had committed teachers were encouraged by them to read but never ever to write. Maybe our teachers too, could not dream beyond the harsh reality of the apartheid limitations. The options open to us were bound once again by the writers we were exposed to—there were the inevitable Shakespeare, Donne, Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and the rest of the male European and North American writers. In 1971, as university students at the University of Cape Town, we protested this selective choice of texts and demanded to have African writers on our curriculum. This was the Black Consciousness period and we were exposed to black writers from the United States, Nigeria and other African countries but still not black women writers. Yes, I really enjoyed creative writing at school—it was fun, beautiful and aesthetically satisfying but nothing was ever to develop from it or so I thought.

As a young child, I always had a sense of wanting to tell people about my experiences. When I saw a very beautiful view or any object or had an experience that really touched me, I found myself formulating words to 'tell' this story. I never understood what this voice was or recognised it as the storyteller in me. I just ignored it. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s I was mainly occupied with the national and women's struggles. During those years I always kept all the pamphlets and organisational documents, as I thought the stories of these struggles had to be told one day. A concern for many of us organisational women at that time was that there were frequent visitors, from Europe and North America mostly, wanting to interview us. They would interview us women activists, sometimes for only 30 minutes, and then return home to write books on us and become the 'experts' on South African women's struggles. It was disturbing to read how they sometimes distorted what we had shared with them. We felt the need to write our stories from our perspective but of course, there was never any time. All these women interviewers were white. Later, South African white women also started interviewing us and writing about our stories. We had some ambivalence about this: on the one hand, it was important that our stories be told but, on the other hand, it seemed to us to be fitting into the apartheid mould: white women were writing about black women's struggles and getting their degrees or publishing books. Black women's lives remained unchanged. Mildred Holo, women's struggles activist and veteran from the 1950s, once commented about her interviewer in conversation (personal communication):

She always interviews me and every time I go to her house she has more and more pillows and I still live in this hovel.

Was this exploitation? Were we being used once again by white women as our mothers and grandmothers had been exploited in their homes as domestic workers? However, it was not a cut and dried case. Later there were white women who were working with us to write our stories and there were fellow white comrades in United Women's Organisation (UWO) and United Women's Congress (UWCO)² who were working 'shoulder to shoulder' with us to fight against apartheid.

The membership of these two organisations ranged from grassroots to academics. We explored various means of mobilising women and people in general. We held rallies on various commemorative days like June 16 (now Youth Day) and August 9 (subsequently Women's Day). Copies of speeches were dispersed with poems, songs and plays about the struggle. I wrote a play performed by the Kensington branch, for the 1982 Women's Rally at Bonteheuwel Civic, depicting the march of the 20,000 women to Pretoria to protest the carrying of passes. The Observatory branch of UWO was particularly prolific in their creative

work. Among other programmes, they wrote and performed an exciting play about the Koornhof Bills³ and held a creative writing workshop facilitated by novelist Menan Du Plessis.

There were a few incidents during the 1980s that provided some sort of niche for creative writing and the arts. The Community Arts Project (CAP) held creative writing courses facilitated by Annemarie Hendrickz and Anne Schuster. It was with great enthusiasm that some of us participated. There we used the poems of Alice Walker as models and wrote our own. In 1985, the state of emergency was declared and none of our organisations could meet. There were various cultural programmes arranged. WECTU (Western Cape Teachers' Trade Union) held a concert at the Luxurama bioscope. Mavis Smallberg read her poetry inspired by the school boycotts and Tina Schouw sang her songs. The Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) organised the First Cape Women's Festivals in 1988 and 1989. Black Sash had a hilarious play about the Special Branch (a tree), the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU) did a play about domestic exploitation and UWCO celebrated black women writers and artists like Miriam Makeba, Bessie Head and Gcina Mhlope. Here culture was used initially as a weapon as all political activity was banned, but what developed was the love and celebration of our creativity and aesthetics. The Arts Festival '86 created and co-ordinated a range of cultural activities but it was banned just before it was to commence.

Penny (1998:106) focuses on the central question, 'Is the colour of a writer still significant in a rainbow nation?' For her it is a definitive yes.

The answer can only be yes, when the critical response is mediated through an awareness of the author's racial identity.

We are in the process of nation-building. However, race still permeates many aspects of our lives and there are often many strong sentiments expressed by black women when white women write from the perspective of black women.⁴ As long as there is inequality and it is the rich and privileged (and mostly white) who can write full time about poor and/or black women, there may be anger and feelings of being exploited by those black/poor women who would like to write more often.⁵ Andre Brink puts this rather eloquently:

Certainly, it would seem that where power acquires a stake in representation, an invisible boundary is crossed, and the adoption of another's voice comes to be perceived as an act of appropriation. Such a situation can all too easily become just another instance of the powerful exploiting the weak (Brink, 1998:110).

However, he also asserts that:

without that act of assumption, that one can imagine oneself into the world or mindset of another—whether the 'other' is someone older than yourself, or of a different race, or different language, or race, or gender there can be no fiction (Brink, 1998: 110).

Penny (1998:109) concludes that if South African writing is undergoing a renaissance, 'this rebirth must encompass a sounding board for the voices of all her children.' However, it will still be a long time before all these voices can be heard. Many black writers and aspirant writers believe that the more privileged writers do not support them in any way. I do not believe that black and/or aspirant black writers want to be pampered by white writers but there could be some form of support. I am sure that there must also be some poor white aspirant writers needing support out there. A black writer (of Indian origin) shared how in the COSAW (Congress of South African Writers) days she felt there was little support for black writers by some white writers. She asked a very famous white COSAW woman writer for a letter of support for her writing fellowship application. The white writer then asked the black writer why she did not sell her house. Incidentally, she did not have a house and still lives with her parents today.

It was at a New Year's Eve party in 1997 that the idea of WEAVE, a black women's writing collective, was born. Women were complaining about Pamela Jooste's novel *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter*. According to many persons at the party, some passages about District 6 in the book just did not ring true for people who had lived there. There was also concern

expressed about the depiction of the only 'African' character in the book. So the challenge was articulated amidst the toasting with sparkling wine: 'Stop complaining, write your own story!' Some of the WEAVE members had been part of the CAP group, COSAW and an informal group that met periodically over several years. These writing groups were mixed:

Meetings were a space of mutual exchange in terms of creativity, skills sharing and moral support for these women, committed to pursuing their passion for writing (WEAVE pamphlet for Cape WOW festival, August 2000).

WEAVE was formalised in 1997, primarily to promote the writing of black women in the Western Cape. It is seen as a means of directly addressing the limited exposure and production of written works. WEAVE members participate collectively and individually in poetry readings on radio, stage performances and international performances. We sometimes do poetry readings and performance poetry with movement and music.

Group members inspire one another. Initially one member had a one-woman play. She then invited another to join her to do her own solo performance. At the recent Cape Town One City Festival, three women did solo performances. There is also inspiration about content. One member explored the life of Krotoa and the Khoi ancestors, then others were inspired to write about their slave and Khoi San ancestors. Krotoa was a member of the Goringhaikona tribe who worked for the Jan van Riebeeck family in 1692. They renamed her Eva and she later became a skilled translator/mediator between the indigenous peoples and the European settlers. At a poetry soiree held at painter/sculptor/artists Evelyn and Willie Bester's home in April this year, women read poems on the life of Sara Bartman. Willie was so inspired that he began a sculpture of Sara Bartman, which he completed in July.

WEAVE had three one-day workshops last year with the specific aim of enhancing already completed work and also exploring themes for those of us who had not written before. These workshops were facilitated by Anne Schuster. The atmosphere of the workshops was encouraging throughout. All our feedback to one another was supportive and constructive. Among the specific feedback guidelines for writers were:

- * Mark with a tick all passages and phrases that you particularly like.
- * Mark with a "?" where something seems confusing or does not ring true.
- * What did you like most about the writing?
- * What do you want to know more about?

During one feedback session, a comment was made that maybe a particular short story could be explored as a play as the content had dramatic features. The story was subsequently rewritten and the piece works very well as a one-woman play.

For one of the first performances, a member self-published her anthology and encouraged others to do the same. At each performance, we now sell our 'barefoot' publications. Individual group members and other writers have experienced problems having their work published. Gladys Thomas was told by a white male publisher that she should stop writing about apartheid because they want new work. What we write about was also brainstormed at the workshops. Some issues discussed were:

- * Who says apartheid is over and that we need to write other, more transitional stories about South Africa today?
- * How come the few white 'struggle' children have been able to write their stories and the thousands of black 'struggle' children cannot or did not?

Some of the most riveting literature published and films produced today are about the Holocaust, which occurred more than 50 years ago. I have not heard anyone state that enough has been written about it. Of course, it is crucial that the atrocities of the Holocaust are recalled in literature and other art forms. They must serve as a lesson so that these evils are not repeated while we work towards a world in which each person can live with dignity and integrity. Today our lives are still permeated with the legacy of apartheid and racism and we, as writers, must therefore explore these themes.

WEAVE is currently self-publishing its first anthology, a collection of poetry and short stories entitled, *ink@boiling point*. It is edited by three WEAVE members, Shelley Barry, Deela Khan and Malika Ndlovu. The anthology includes work on various themes like spirituality, sexuality, menopause and old-age, disabilities, labour history and relationships. Although WEAVE is

committed to encouraging black girl children and women to write and publish, this year has been devoted to improving our own work and the publishing of our book.

No story of WEAVE is complete without mentioning Joan Baker. Joan was one of the founder members, a short story writer par excellence. Her short story, 'Undercover Comrade', has been published in three major anthologies. It was Joan who gave the acronym WEAVE its content. Joan died in June this year. It is a fitting tribute to Joan that WEAVE continues to exist and inspire black women to tell their side of the story. We in WEAVE are not saying that white women cannot and should not write about black women. What we are arguing for is that there should be more, new and different voices, especially those of marginalised persons—black women, disabled, gay and lesbian and other minorities.

REFERENCES

- Baird, Vanessa. 'Foreword'. *Eye to Eye - Women*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997.
 Brink, Andre. *The Art of Literary Ventriloquism*. Leadership, 1998, pp.17, 4.
 Penny, Sarah. *The White Scribes of Africa*. Leadership, 1998, pp. 17, 3.

NOTES

1. Black South African women in exile or living in foreign countries, because of their material realities, have written and published much more than their counterparts who live within South Africa.
2. UWO was formally launched in April 1981 and UWCO was established with the amalgamation of UWO and Women's Front in March 1986.
3. Also known as the Disorderly Bills. African people who were found to be 'trespassing' in areas reserved for whites, were depicted as 'disorderly' and would therefore be endorsed out to the homelands.
4. Penny (1998:106) refers to the article written by Dr. Zimitri Erasmus in *The Sunday Independent* (undated). Comments were made at various workshops, articulated most vehemently by unemployed black women writers, that although people admire the work of Antjie Krog, she had been privileged in the past and was once again privileged in the new South Africa when she was commissioned to cover the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Antjie Krog, an Afrikaner white woman, is a well-known, award-winning and respected writer. The TRC process is probably one of the most sensitive, central and meaningful processes to promote nation-building in this fledgling South African rainbow nation. It was indeed a privilege to work with the material generated in this cause and to have been part of the TRC process as Krog has been. Krog creatively uses the TRC material to explore her own personal narrative and that of her family. The juxtaposition of the personal narrative with the TRC material captures the complexity of the South African landscape. This book has further cemented Krog as one of South Africa's foremost writers. The black writers felt resentful that more attempts were not made to use more black writers during this process.
5. The varying responses to the question: "What is your next book?" from the panel of women writers at a *Weekly Mail Book Week*, held at the Baxter Theatre in the early 1990s, were remarkable. The white writers all responded, enthusiastically outlining their writing plans, while the one black writer on the panel said she had no time to write because of the demands of her work (wage labour).

Gertrude Fester is a political activist and aspirant poet and playwright. One of her greatest achievements is that some of her ex-students are now professional writers and grassroots women with whom she worked are now seasoned politicians. They ascribe this to Gertrude's encouragement and inspiration.

Forthcoming in issue #54, African Feminisms II, Agenda
 (<http://www.agenda.org.za/about.htm>), a quarterly feminist journal, published in South Africa.